



Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: A Conversation with Former Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion.....2

- Walter Russell Mead, *Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute*
- Antony Blinken, *Foreign Policy Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden*

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1840-video-event-dialogues-on-american-foreign-policy-and-world-affairs-a-conversation-with-former-deputy-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken72020>

About Hudson Institute: Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations

Walter Russell Mead:

Hello and welcome to the Hudson Institute's Dialogues on Foreign Policy series. I'm Walter Mead, Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute. It's my pleasure to be joined today by Antony "Tony" Blinken, the Chief Foreign Policy Adviser for the Biden for President Campaign and former Deputy Secretary of State and Deputy National Security Adviser.

During his career, Mr. Blinken has held a number of distinguished government positions. He was National Security Adviser to Vice President Biden during the Obama administration. He also served as a Senate Staff Director for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from 2002 to 2008 and on the National Security Council staff during the Clinton administration.

During his time at the State Department, Mr. Blinken played an instrumental role in the diplomatic efforts to counter ISIS. He worked on the global refugee crisis and the rebalance to Asia. He's a contributing opinion writer for The New York Times and a global affairs analyst for CNN. Tony, it's good to see you. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Tony Blinken:

Great to be with you, Walter. Thanks for having me.

Walter Russell Mead:

Great. I think it's going to be interesting conversation today. I hope we'll be able to follow up at various times. For the format for these conversations, as some of our regular viewers know is that we try to give people here a real chance to say what's on their mind, really give us some detail about how they see the world, what their priorities are. This is not about being controversial. Assumption is that the viewers are smart enough to figure out whether they agree or disagree with what they're hearing, but also that there are people who want real information about what's going on in the world.

As someone who is an extremely close advisor to the Vice President and heads the foreign policy team of the President of the Biden presidential campaign, few people are in a better spot to talk about what a Biden administration foreign policy might look like than Tony Blinken. As more polls come out and more people start thinking that a Biden administration is not just a possibility, but maybe even a likelihood. Obviously, the interest in what that policy might look like is going to intensify.

I wonder maybe the best place to start, Tony, would be for me to ask you looking around the world, how would you characterize the main lines of what a Biden foreign policy might look like?

Tony Blinken:

Well, Walter, I think, first it might help to just take a step back and think about the world that if Vice President Biden's elected, we would be inheriting. That goes a long way to telling you the direction of the foreign policy we pursue in office. I think it's no less important for being evident that we're living in a time of shifting power and alignments among nations, a huge diffusion of power away from states and a growing questioning of governance within states, tremendous economic, demographic, technological, environmental, geopolitical change that we're all experiencing every day and in fact, the rapidity and pace of change is such that I think there's a general sense that we've lost our North star. People are increasingly confused. They feel a sense of chaos. They don't know which end is up.

I think as a consequence of that, as well as a tremendous inequality problem both within our own country and around the world, we are facing, I think, the most challenging and complex international landscape and international security landscape, certainly in decades, if not longer.

Having said that, I think the Vice President certainly believes it's within our considerable capacity, America's considerable capacity to shape things at least on the margins for a better future where our security, our prosperity, our values are enhanced, not diminished. That's kind of the big picture that we're facing. Even in all of this change, I think there are certain consonants and let me just briefly mention those and we can get into more specifics.

First, whether we like it or not, the world tends not to organize itself. There is a premium still, and in some ways, even more than before, on American engagement, on American leadership, because basically we have a choice. If we're not doing a lot of that organizing in terms of shaping the rules and the norms and the institutions through which countries relate to one another, then one of two things, either someone else is doing it and probably not in a way that advances our own interests and values or maybe just as bad, no one is and then you tend to have chaos and a vacuum that may be filled by bad things before so by good things. There's a premium, I think the Vice President believes, on American engagement, on American leadership.

Second and again, no less important for being obvious, there's also a premium on finding ways and probably new ways to cooperate among nations and among different stakeholders because simply put the big problems that we face as a country and as a planet, whether it's climate change, whether it's a pandemic, whether it's the spread of bad weapons. To state the obvious, none of these have unilateral solutions, even in a country as powerful as the United States can't handle them alone. There's no wall high enough or thick enough to ward them off. We have to figure out ways to cooperate more effectively taking into account the fact that there are now all sorts of groups and individuals empowered by technology and information that have greater veto authority than ever before on the decisions of traditional sources of authority and decision making, like a national government or an international organization.

Add to that, a crisis in the credibility of institutions, hyper partisanship, corruption permeating our systems in different ways, it makes for an incredibly challenging time. That's kind of a big envelope in which I think a new administration will have to engage.

Walter Russell Mead:

I think that's right. Maybe what we should do is talk about a few hotspots and then get back to the sort of overarching issue, if that works and I think the first thing that would be on a lot of people's mind would be the US-China relationship, where in some ways, oddly, even though US political climate has become very polarized, we've seen a continuation. The Obama administration began a rebalance toward Asia. Today, you hear from many Democrats, as well as many Republicans a concern about what's going on in China and the future of the relationship. How do you see a Biden administration getting sort of setting itself up to deal with China?

Tony Blinken:

Well, first of all, I think you're right. There is a growing consensus across parties that China poses a series of new challenges and that the status quo was really not sustainable particularly when it comes to China's commercial and economic practices, the lack of reciprocity in the relationships or something that couldn't be sustained and needed to be and continue to need to be dealt with.

Here's the problem and again, take a step back, my concern now is that in terms of China's strategic interests and in terms of our own, China, as a result of the last three and a half years is in a stronger position and we're in a weaker position and that's what a Biden administration would have to start to rebuild from. What do I mean by that?

If you think about what China would hope to achieve strategically around the world, unfortunately, in my judgment, the Trump administration has helped them advance their interests. Weaker US alliances, China sees alliances as a core source of strength for the United States, something they don't share and enjoy. Unfortunately, the way President Trump has pursued his policies that's weakened, not strengthened our core alliances, particularly in Asia.

Institutions, China's trying to assert its own leadership in international institutions at the expense of our own. Well, our own withdrawal from virtually every institution you can think of has left an opening for China to fill.

When it comes to values, our abdication of standing up for our own values and in Asia and with regard to China's actions, has, I think, given the government in Beijing, a sense of greater impunity when it comes to cracking down on democracy in Hong Kong or for that matter, dealing and abusing the human rights of Uyghurs in China.

Finally, our own democracy, when it is weak, when it looks like it's in disarray, when it seems not to be delivering for its people when people are questioning its legitimacy, that is arguably good for China because our model looks less attractive than it otherwise would. Well, I think President Trump, unfortunately, has led an assault on our own democracy, its institutions, its values, its people that is served to further delegitimize it, not just in the eyes of Americans but around the world. In that sense, I'm afraid we're at a strategic disadvantage. China is at a strategic advantage at this particular moment.

Having said that, how would we approach things? A few things that are worth underscoring, first, it's vital because we are in a competition with China and there's nothing wrong with competition if it's fair. In fact, it hopefully brings out in some ways the best. We need, in the first instance, to invest in our own competitiveness. That means making some very fundamental reorientation of resources and priorities when it comes to investing in American infrastructure, American education, the health care system, our workers and their competitiveness.

Second, one of the things I think that's been a deficiency in the Trump administration's approach to contending with China is it's done so not with our allies and partners but without them, indeed while alienating them. We need to rally our allies and partners instead of alienating them to deal with some of the challenges that China poses.

For example, on trade, as you know, Walter, we're about 25% of world GDP alone. When we're working with allies and partners, depending on who we bring into the mix, it's 50 or 60% of GDP. That's a lot more weight and a lot harder for China to ignore.

Third, we need to be standing up for our values and put them back at the center of our foreign policy, not walk away from them. We obviously need to be in a place to effectively deter aggression, if China pursues it.

Finally, I think you'd see a Biden demonstration having reestablished a relative strength in the relationship, then be able to engage China and work with China, in areas where our interests clearly overlap, whether it is again, contending with climate change, dealing with global health and pandemics, dealing with the spread of dangerous weapons. We're much better off though, finding ways to cooperate when we're acting from a position of strength than from a position of weakness.

Walter Russell Mead:

Okay, I hear what you're saying. On the questions of values and democracy, I haven't been to Asia in the last couple few months, obviously, but I spent some time there last year. I was hearing from a number of people in a number of countries that democracy promotion is not as popular among a lot of our potential Asian allies, as say, was in Europe during the Cold War.

If we want Thailand and Burma and Vietnam, a number of other countries to work with us and even in the India to a certain extent, which is a democracy, but has a somewhat different view of what that might mean than we do, as kind of the ideological component while providing definitely certain advantages or I could add, the Philippines, also complicates the task of alliance building and management in Asia. How would you respond to that?

Tony Blinken:

A couple of things, first, this is not about some crusade at the point of a bayonet building a world of democracies, but I think we have to start from, at least as I would see it a basic premise, which is when we're thinking about and then I'll get to the Asia piece more specifically, but look, if Joe Biden's elected president, he's going to inherit two things; a divided country and a world increasingly in disarray. He would argue, I think, that the best answer, the best initial foundational answer to those challenges is in fact, democracy because it is when it's functioning, the foundation of our strength at home but also abroad.

It should reflect who we are, certainly it's how we've seen ourselves and at least until recently, it's also I think, how the world tends to see us but that democracy is obviously under challenge in ways that arguably it hasn't been before. That matters as a foundation for our foreign policy.

First, when you think about it, the strength of our democracy at home is directly tied to our ability to be a force for progress, to mobilize collective action around the world. Here again, my concern is that we've seen a daily assault on democracy under this administration, which has tarnished our own ability to lead. As Joe Biden likes to say, "We get a lot of mileage out of leading by the power of our example, not just the example of our power."

Then, abroad, other democracies tend to be a source of strength for us if we're acting together but here again, we've got a problem, as you know very well, we've seen a retreat when it comes to democracy over the last decade or so. Freedom House, which tracks this stuff and ranks countries of the 40 or so countries ranked free in the '80s, the '90s, the early 2000s, fully half, I think, have fallen backwards on their metrics and there is what people call a democratic recession. Autocracies from Russia to China are trying to exploit that, to add fuel to our own troubles.

At the very moment that democracies most need leadership and I would argue leadership from the United States, playing the role that is played before, as the leader of the free world. Unfortunately, we have a president who, by embracing autocrats and dismissing democrats, seems to many to suit it up for the other side. It's a long way of saying that if we renew our democracy at home, if we revitalize our alliances with democracies in the first instance around the world, that creates a foundation for us to act, I believe, more effectively in dealing with lots of challenges.

Now, I don't think it's one size fits all and there are countries that we need to work with clearly, including in Asia that may not fit the Jeffersonian democracy ideal that we may have. Obviously, we don't either at this point but when you shore up your democratic base, when you get democracies working together, that creates a foundation upon which to bring in others on different issues.

When it comes to Asia, in particular, look, I think we did the rebalance under the Obama-Biden administration. It was an effective vehicle, I think, for redirecting our time, our energy and resources to a part of the world that arguably matters more than any other to our future but that entailed working with countries that certainly were not fully democratic under the measures you and I would consider. We obviously need to pursue that. Hopefully, as our model becomes, once again, attractive and effective at dealing with problems and helping people advance in their own lives, then you'll have an incentive for countries to continue to democratize themselves.

Walter Russell Mead:

Okay. Well, let's jump from Asia to the Middle East. Here, I guess I'd start by asking, there had been some discussion that maybe the Middle East doesn't matter as much to the United States now as it did at a time, say when we were importing oil and oil was kind of seen as the key to everything around the world and in the rise of China, has the place of the Middle East written large changed in American Foreign Policy?

Tony Blinken:

Well, I think, in short, yes, it has and again, as we're looking at things already in the Obama-Biden administration with the so-called pivot to Asia or the rebalance to Asia, that was simply a recognition of what we saw as the facts that when we considered where our interests were most acute, where the future seemed the most to be emerging for the United States in terms of our interests. We were under resourced in Asia and arguably over resourced in other areas. I think that remains the case.

Presumably, in a Biden administration, we would see more emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, more emphasis on our own hemisphere as well as some sustained engagement, I would hope with Africa and obviously, Europe remains a partner first resort not last resort when it comes to contending with the challenges we face. Just as a matter of time allocation and budget priorities, I think we would be doing less not more in the Middle East.

Having said that, there are obviously certain fundamentals that remain constant including and starting with, even our relationship with Israel as the anchor and foundation for democracy in the region, that won't change. The commitment to Israel security is not going away but overall, in terms of the amount of time and focus and energy and resources, we need to be thinking about how we allocate them to best match our interests. Again, I think that suggests more in the Asia-Pacific, more in our own hemisphere and the sustained engagement in Europe.

Walter Russell Mead:

You've talked about if Iran were to return to full compliance with the JCPOA, the US would reenter under a Biden administration and then take it from there. How what might that look like?

Tony Blinken:

Well, here again, I think we have a problem that President Trump has turned into a much bigger one, a much deeper one and potentially into a crisis. The President did two things. He tore up the JCPOA, the nuclear agreement with Iran and he said it would lead to and compel Iran to negotiate a better agreement. He also instituted a campaign of so-called maximum pressure that he said would curb Iran's provocative actions in the region.

In fact, exactly the opposite has happened as many predicted at the time. Far from leading to a better agreement, the unraveling of the JCPOA, because of the actions of the Trump administration, has now put us in a place where one, we're isolated from our partners who negotiated the agreement with us and two and much more importantly even, Iran is restarting dangerous components of this program and putting itself in a position where it is closer to a capacity to develop a solid material for a nuclear weapon on short order than it was when we left office.

There is no, as far as I can tell, no strategy, no plan on the part of this administration to do anything about this. We're heading right back to where we were before the agreement, which is a really terrible binary choice between either taking action to stop the program of all of the potential unintended consequences of doing that or doing nothing and allowing Iran to be in a breakout position where it can develop a nuclear weapon on very, very short order.

Then, in terms of its provocative actions, this strange schizophrenic seesawing back and forth on the part of the administration in terms of not responding to things Iran was doing, for example, the attack on the pipelines in Saudi Arabia, to then taking out Qasem Soleimani for whom no one is shedding a tear. This schizophrenic back and forth, led to a sort of tit for tat ratcheting up of tensions including missile attacks on our bases in Iraq that harmed more than 100 Americans brought us to potentially the brink of conflict. Again, we've seen Iran take more provocative actions in the region, not less. The Trump administration strategy has backfired in a massive way.

The most fundamental challenge for us and problem for us in terms of our own interest is, in the first instance, dealing with Iran's nuclear program. That's what the JCPOA was about. If Iran comes back into compliance with its obligations, Joe Biden said, "We should too and we would too," and then having brought the allies back on our side but now they keep asserting an equivalence between Iran and the United States, pretty extraordinary, asking us both to calm down.

With our partners and allies back on our side, with the agreement, once again, enforced, we can use that as a platform to try to build a stronger and longer agreement and with the allies with us again, we're in a much better position jointly to confront Iran's actions and provocations that we don't like.

Right now, most of our partners are spending all of their time trying to figure out how to keep the nuclear agreement alive, not working with us to deal with Iran's excesses in the region.

Walter Russell Mead:

Let me just quickly on the Israel question, if Israel goes ahead with annexations on the West Bank in the next few months, does that complicate the Israel relationship with the Biden administration?

Tony Blinken:

Well, here's what it does, it certainly complicates even more than it already is the prospect of achieving a two state solution in the Middle East and that outcome, two states for two people, in my judgment and the Vice President's judgment more importantly, represents the best way and probably the only way that you'll have a secure future for Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and a state for the Palestinians.

And so any unilateral action by either side that makes that prospect even more difficult and more distant is something that the vice president opposes and would oppose as president. We'll see what Israel chooses to do but ideally, obviously, it won't pursue it and we will find ways to rebuild an environment in which is possible for the parties to reengage in the direction of two states.

Walter Russell Mead:

I want to shift a bit toward Europe and maybe the way to do that is to look at Turkey for a moment, which is a NATO ally and a European country in some ways but is increasing a Middle Eastern actor as well. Where do you see the relationship with Turkey going and what would a Biden administration be looking for there?

Tony Blinken:

Okay, it's in a very, very challenging place. As you said, Turkey is a NATO ally by its engagements, by its geographical position, by its interests. It's a vitally important country and it winds up being in one way or another and often an essential way, critical to some issue, conflict, initiative.

We obviously want to find a way to have a more productive and positive relationship with Turkey, but that requires the Turkish government itself to want the same thing. We obviously have some real issues and differences but we also have areas where it would make good sense for us to find ways to work more effectively together, Syria, for example, being one of them.

I would hope that we can find ways to do that but I don't want to underestimate some of the challenges that we're facing in the relationship and that's going to require, I think, first and foremost, some very direct and clear talk. I will say, Vice President has a long relationship with President Erdogan. They've known each other. They've engaged directly on a lot of things and I think we found in working with Turkey that that relationship is obviously the most important one.

I suspect you'd see some significant engagement on the part of the President Biden with his Turkish counterpart to see if we can work through a host of issues that we need to find ways to tackle together.

Walter Russell Mead:

Well, this sort of gets me to a Europe NATO question, because as we look at the situation in Libya now, we can see that sort of France has lined up with Russia and Egypt and the UAE and some others in Libya, Italy it's kind of quietly supporting Turkey in a way they're interest seemed aligned. In that sense, here in the Mediterranean, an area of vital interest to the EU and a real importance to NATO, we don't have a coordinated EU policy really in Libya. We don't have anything that looks like a coordinated NATO policy in Libya.

I just raised this as an example of some of the kinds of issues, it seems to me, we're looking at trans-Atlantically now that it's not just is Germany paying enough money for its offense or is the United States being engaged enough in certain ways, but there's a kind of divergence of interests and a failure in many countries to align policies with these alliance structures and international structures. How does a Biden administration sort of work on that?

Tony Blinken:

Well, the first instance of showing up again and demonstrating that you actually support these institutions and see them as important vehicles for advancing shared interests. When we walk away from, when we spend most of our time taking a two by four to them, it's not really a surprise that they don't prove to be effective vehicles for dealing with really, really hard problems. I think revaluing these alliances starting with NATO is going to be very, very important to a Biden administration. Similarly, with the EU, President Trump has treated as an adversary, when in fact, it can and should be, a vital partner for the United States, again in dealing with very difficult challenging situations like Libya.

That's really the first step is actually revitalizing these alliances, revitalizing these partnerships, reasserting that America values them and that we want to be engaged in them or with them to work together to tackle these hard problems.

Libya is a particularly challenging one and I have to acknowledge that we obviously did not succeed in the Obama-Biden administration in getting that right, in part, I think one of the things that we hadn't seen as clearly as we should have, arguably, is that Gaddafi had done a brilliant job making sure that there was nothing that could rise to challenge his power over the years. There was an effect virtually no function in bureaucracy or administrative state with which to partner after he was gone from the scene. That made it very difficult to get anything done.

There was also, in fact the country is divided in so many ways, also a hardcore of nationalism. That made it very, very difficult to get Libyans to accept any kind of international security force that arguably might have helped stabilize the situation after Gaddafi or even training for their own security forces.

Now, of course, in the intervening time, we've had vacuums and those vacuums, as I said earlier, been filled by bad things, not good things and we have Libya as a sort of terrain of a proxy contest for other powers that you listed so well. That's going to be very, very hard to untangle but again, while trying to get starts with actually valuing and using the institutions that allow us to cooperate and collaborate and find joint approaches to hard problems.

Walter Russell Mead:

Okay, just quickly because I do want to move on to some of the global issues, there's always Russia, which seems to be looming over American politics. I know every American president, at least since George W. Bush has been sure that they could figure out a way to work with Putin. So far, I'd say we are 0-3 in that deployment. What would President Biden try to do there?

Tony Blinken:

It's interesting because if you remember back, the very first foreign policy speech of the Obama-Biden administration was one that the Vice President delivered at the Munich Security Conference in February of 2009. That was the, what was then called the reset speech in terms of the relationship between the United States and Russia. Indeed, we talked about resetting the relationship.

At that point, it had reached what seemed to be a low point and we thought there were areas where we could more effectively work together because it was in our mutual interest. Indeed, we wound up doing that when it comes to new start. We were the champion for getting Russia into the WTO. We work together even in Afghanistan at that point in time. Things have really changed.

That speech tried to create a foundation for the reset but there was another part to that speech that people didn't pick up on as much at the time, in which the Vice President said, "Even as we seek to reset relations with Russia, we are not going to compromise on certain core values, among them, the conviction that this is no longer a world of spheres of influence, and we will not accept them." It's not a world in which one country can tell its neighbors with whom they can associate or not associate or what their policy should or shouldn't be. It's not a world in which one country should be able to violate the sovereign borders of another by exerting its greater strength.

Unfortunately, the way things have unfolded, we've seen that second part of the speech come to life. Here again, we've had, I think, maybe this the strangest and still unexplained chapter of the Trump administration is President Trump's relationship to Mr. Putin and to Russia and even as elements of his

administration have sought to take an appropriately tough line on Russia for the things that it does. President Trump repeatedly undermines that effort and, of course, famously, he denies that Russia interfered in our 2016 election and is trying to do it once again and he took the word of Mr. Putin over our own intelligence community. Again, you've got to start with recognizing the problem and recognizing the challenge.

It's funny, I was just reading a piece before we got on the video conference that my friend Dov Zackheim wrote in which he quotes from George Kennan's Long Cable. I just printed it because it's so remarkably compelling and remarkably, remarkably of the moment. This is Kennan, what, 70 some odd years ago. Let me just read it because it's remarkably on point. "At bottom of the Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive, Russian sense of insecurity. Russia's rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form.

Originally, this was insecurity of a peaceful agricultural people trying to live on a vast exposed plain in the neighborhood of fierce nomadic peoples. To this was added, as Russia came into contact with economically advanced West, fears of more competent, more powerful, more highly organized societies.

For this reason, Russia's rulers have always feared foreign penetration. Russians will participate officially in international organizations where they see opportunity for extending their power or inhibiting or diluting the power of others. Efforts will be made to disrupt Western national self-confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest, to stimulate all forms of disunity, poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residence."

Wow, that sure sounds familiar. I think recognizing that strain in Russia's policies that predate Mr. Putin and presumably will follow him needs to be front and center in our thinking."

Again, my own take is when you're able to approach countries with whom we're in an adversarial position on a number of issues from a position of strength, that also much better enables you to find areas of cooperation if it happens to be in your self-interest. For example, Strategic Arms Limitation is something we should continue to pursue with Russia but we're best off doing it when we have our eyes wide open not as they've been for the last three and a half years firmly shut.

Walter Russell Mead:

Well, I agree. I love that quote from Kennan there. I remember I wrote some years ago that I lost a lot of faith in the American intellectual foreign policy class because at the end of the Cold War, everybody said, "Oh, that Kennan is such a genius [inaudible 00:37:53] 40 years ago when it finally worked, but then they simultaneously said, "Now that Russia is a communist, we can be friends and it's all going to be great."

In fact, the whole point of Kennan was that the problem here is not that they're communists but that they're Russian, is a thing that we really have to come to grips with. Actually, that's also very discouraging for a writer on foreign affairs to realize that the most profound essay maybe in the 20th century in America could be so universally misunderstood and misapplied. You wonder sometimes why you get up in the morning.

Tony Blinken:

Some things are truly evergreen and this really is one of them. I'm glad. I just happened to see this op-ed by but by Dov and this just jumped out and it's why I'd like to go back and read Gaddis every once in a while, et cetera.

Walter Russell Mead:

No, it's good stuff. Well, I want to move to global issues here and maybe sort of a jumping, sort of again halfway house is to think about Latin American hemisphere for a moment because I do think the next administration, whoever that is, is going to face deep issues in the hemisphere and those are often very divisive in terms of American politics, as well but you can look from Brazil to Mexico just to take that group.

There are significant issues in just a large number of countries ranging from sort of political polarization to climate, maybe we see here to sort of a broader social breakdown, a breakdown of law and order in places and then the Venezuelan sort of imploding black hole. It's a mess. How does a new administration wrap its head around this and we can't ignore it? How does one play a constructive role?

Tony Blinken:

Yeah, we certainly can't ignore it. On the contrary, we have a profound interest in engaging it. On the upside, if we can get to a place where we have a hemisphere of functioning democracies, growing economies that respect human rights, that is profoundly in the interests of the United States, obviously, the interests of the countries themselves and the world, but as you say very well, there are huge challenges.

Let's just take one that's actually directly confronts us and that is the migration challenge from the northern triangle countries like Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador. Obviously, the problems in those countries when it comes to crime and gang violence, drugs, lack of economic opportunity, among other things are huge drivers. The idea that someone wakes up in the morning and says, "Gee, wouldn't it be great fun today to give up everything I know, where I live, my family, my friends, my comfort and go to someplace that may not want me where I may not even know the language or have family or friends. Wouldn't that be a great thing to do?"

People who undertake these journeys have hugely, hugely, hugely compelling drivers that push them in that direction. Parenthetically, they tend to be a source of tremendous strength for our country because it takes extraordinary courage, dynamism, energy, to give up everything, to put your life in jeopardy, to try to find a better life somewhere else but we obviously have a stake in helping countries find ways to make themselves more attractive so that more people don't feel compelled to make that kind of journey.

It's interesting when Joe Biden was Vice President, we talked about not being able to get anything done in Washington and the partisan divide, he actually secured bipartisan support for almost a billion dollars in aid for El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, but backed up by concrete commitments from those countries to take on corruption, to take on violence, to take on endemic poverty that were driving people to leave their homes. Some big chunks of this money were actually sent through independent organizations so that they didn't go into a government black hole. We started to see security improve. We started to see migration flows decrease, for example, in El Salvador. That was, I think, a smart approach, not throwing money away, but tying it to concrete commitments that were in the interests of both sides.

We have a plan. The Vice President has a plan to build significantly on that initiative over four years with basically a \$4 billion regional strategy that would require countries to contribute their own resources, their own commitments to undertake concrete reforms that make them more attractive places for their own people. That's the kind of thing that's both smart and potentially effective and it's clearly in our interest.

Walter Russell Mead:

Okay. We'll now go into the sort of overarching global issues and I think maybe one of the biggest differences in the two candidates this fall is going to be over in the environment, both over the dangers of climate change and over the sort of strategies for coping with it or dealing with it and it's a huge issue that obviously bleeds into almost every facet of foreign policy. I'd be very interested to hear how the Biden camp is thinking of this.

Tony Blinken:

Well, quite simply, it is arguably the one truly existential issue that we face. It has to be and under a Biden administration, would be a number one priority. He's put out a detailed plan for what he would do in terms of the very significant and urgent investments at home to put us on track, to have a clean energy economy with net zero emissions by 2050 but let's just think briefly about the international piece. That's equally important because we're what, 15% of global emissions. By definition, even if we do everything just right at home, that doesn't solve the problem if the rest of the world is 85% of global emissions.

The benefit of getting things right at home is we can then leverage our economic and moral authority to push the world to take more determined action. Vice President thinks it's critical and said that on day one of his administration, he would rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement.

Then, as a priority certainly in the first year of his administration, convene a summit of the world's major carbon emitters, to rally countries not just on sticking with Paris, but to actually raise their ambitions and try to push progress further and faster.

We'd also look to do a number of other things, for example, locking in enforceable commitments to reduce emissions in global shipping and aviation, pursuing stronger measures to make sure that other nations can't undercut the United States economically as we meet our own commitments.

One, for example, would involve working to insist that China, which is the world's largest emitter of carbon, stop subsidizing coal exports and outsourcing pollution to other countries by financing billions of dollars' worth of dirty fossil fuel energy projects through the Belt and Road Initiative.

That's the kind of approach that we would take but again, it does start at home because if we're not doing what we need to do, it's a heck of a lot harder to convince the rest of the world to do what it needs to do.

Walter Russell Mead:

Trade, you've mentioned trade before. Will the Biden administration try to strengthen the WTO, go back to the TPP? Where do you see that headed?

Tony Blinken:

I think, again, Walter, I would start with a couple of basic premises one of which is that we are what, about 5% of the world's population. If we want to reach the other 95%, if we want to be able to sell our products and our services and our ingenuity, we've got to be able to reach them.

As a basic principle, trade is profoundly in the interests of the United States. If we're going to sustain our growth, if we're going to advance our growth, if we're going to sustain and advance our standard of living, we have to find ways to continue to open markets and to make sure that American products, American services, American ideas can be consumed around the world.

Second basic premise is that and it goes back to something we were talking about at the very beginning, we have a choice to make. If we're not engaged in these efforts, then someone else is likely to be in our place. It makes a big difference to the United States if we are helping to shape the rules that govern trade, the norms that govern trade, the institutions that govern trade, and make sure that they're in a race to the top, not the bottom, when it comes, for example, to protecting the rights of labor, protecting the environment, transparency, et cetera. Having said that, I think we clearly need to and would do things differently going forward.

First, the guiding principle and the prism through which a President Biden would look at trade is what we are doing in the interest of American workers. Everything we do has to be grounded in the proposition that we're going to fight like heck for American workers.

Second, if we want to be effective in trade and in competition, have we invested in our own competitiveness? Have we put the resources and the time and effort into building our educational capacity, our infrastructure, our healthcare system, and of course, into workers themselves, and then are the benefits that accrue just going to corporations in ways that allow them to just buy back their stock, pay more dividends and boost the salaries of their CEOs or are they actually being invested in workers.

Then, as we're negotiating, it's vitally important that we have all of the interests affected by a trade agreement at the table at the start, not just receiving the final product at the end. Labor leaders, environmental leaders, as well as other groups that are affected, other interests that are affected, they need to be in on this from the takeoff, not just the landing because otherwise, whatever's negotiated is probably not going to be politically sustainable. We were talking earlier about how information and technology has given all sorts of new actors, the ability to have veto power over decisions, agreements arrived at by national governments and international institutions. Well, if they're not in on things from the takeoff, they're likely to use that veto power on the landing.

Walter Russell Mead:

I think you make some very good points there. I'm thinking though about, say, a country like India and we're probably the environmental and labor standards that we might want or some American civil groups might want in a trade agreement are going to be disturbing where the environmental problems, strongly green US administration's likely to be asking India to do a fairly long list of things it doesn't want to do necessarily we spontaneously leap to want to do and in the same way on maybe some human rights and democracy issues particularly with respect to Muslims in India, in Kashmir, and elsewhere, and yet at the same time, it's hard to imagine an effective policy vis a vis China that doesn't include very strong US-India links.

I guess my question is, how does, again, you can't possibly give a detailed exposition of India policy but how do we think about these things together because it seems to me they do really matter.

Tony Blinken:

I couldn't agree more, Walter, with the premise of your question and I think from Vice President Biden's perspective, strengthening and deepening the relationship with India is going to be a very high priority. It's usually important to the future of the Indo-Pacific and the kind of order that we all want; it's fair, stable, and hopefully increasingly democratic and it's vital to being able to tackle some of these big global challenges.

By the way, I think this has been over Republican and Democratic administration's success story, going back to the Clinton administration, the Bush administration and then the Obama-Biden administration.

During the Bush administration, then Senator Biden partnered with that administration to help get the peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement, the 123 agreement through the United States Senate, usually important to solidifying our relationship.

In our own administration, during the Obama-Biden administration, there was concrete progress across a whole series of initiatives and efforts under both Prime Minister Singh and then under Prime Minister Modi. There was this defense technology and trade initiative. The idea there was to kind of strengthen India's defense industrial base and that then paved the way for American and Indian companies to work together to produce important technology.

We made India a so called major defense partner. That was something that we got the congress to approve and that was unique to India. What that did is it basically ensured that when it comes to advance sensitive technology that India needs to strengthen its military, it's treated on par with our allies and partners.

Having sort of set that foundation and made the relationship stronger, guess what? We then worked hard to persuade India that it would be more prosperous and more secure if it's signed on to the Paris Climate Agreement. We succeeded. It wasn't easy. It was for the all the reasons that you cited. It was a challenging effort but Vice President Biden was one of the leaders of the effort to convince our partners in India and they did. I think that's a reflection, again, of the fact that we cannot solve common global challenges without India as part of the deal.

Across the board, we were working hard, not just to advance clean energy, but to do a whole series of things, public health cooperation, space exploration, humanitarian relief operations, all of these things were part and parcel of the relationship and all of them went to strengthening it.

Now, you're right, we obviously have challenges now and real concerns, for example, about some of the actions that the government has taken particularly in cracking down on freedom of movement and freedom of speech in Kashmir, some of the laws on citizenship but you're always better engaging with a partner and a vitally important one like India, when you can speak frankly and directly about areas where you have differences even as you're working to build greater cooperation and strengthen the relationship going forward. That would be the approach and again, I think we've seen evidence that it works.

Walter Russell Mead:

All right. Well, I think we've covered a lot of ground. We have not covered all the ground.

Maybe I can persuade you to come back sometime and we can take another bite at the apple here but I really appreciate your sharing the time and look forward to a very, very interesting debate during the presidential season.

Tony Blinken:

Great. Thanks, Walter. I really enjoyed the conversation and I welcome an opportunity to pursue it. Thanks.

Walter Russell Mead:

All right. Great. Thank you, Tony. Take care.

Tony Blinken:

Bye.